

Understanding the Goals of Preschool Education

ERIC Clearinghouse of Rural Education

You peek in the window while waiting for your children to be let out of class. You see some students playing with puzzles, three others trying on cowboy hats and vests pretending they're cowboys. Six others listen to a fairy tale being told by the teacher. As you leave, the teacher hands you many work samples. Much of it is coloring and cutting/pasting. You ask yourself, "How will they learn to read and write if so much time is spent playing?"

To better understand what's happening, it would be a good idea to review what these children already know and the goals of education for young children (ages three to five).

Characteristics

When children are young, their world is very small, and they think they are the center of it. They try to make sense of what their bodies tell them, and they believe everyone else sees, hears, and feels the same things they do. They begin using basic symbols such as a heart to represent love. However, these are related to specific experiences they have lived. Children must still develop their home language and English at complex levels. They must increase their number of words (vocabulary), especially in areas outside the home.

At the same time, their bodies are growing, and they need to move to develop their motor skills: how to cut, following along with eye movements, and controlling their arm and leg movements before controlling their fingers and toes. They must also learn more about behaviors expected at school and with other students. Above all, children must experience success in what they try to do and receive encouragement to continue learning.

Preschool Goals

Preschool education must develop four areas of student growth: language, cognitive (mental categories), motor (muscle control), and social.

In the area of language and literacy, young students must learn that those "little marks" have meaning, that they stand for something. Teachers look for opportunities to model and point out these ideas. They place labels with the names of the items and furniture in the classroom. Teachers make lists and organize their thinking using charts to compare ideas. They carry out these activities in a very hands on, active approach and have before them the items students have just experienced or discussed. "Student talk" with peers and with the teacher is also encouraged.

Children take part in activities where they learn about categories, for example, different careers, geography, or the environment. They must make connections between mental categories, called concepts, such as: What is transportation, the seasons, or if something is the same or different. Children learn how to compare and give their opinions. All these skills must be learned before learning to read.

The children's bodies continue to develop, and they are given tasks to extend their academic skills. They have to learn to recognize different sounds and if these sounds are the same or different. Later, the children are shown how to follow letters on a page and follow the teacher as he/she reads.

Finally, children need to learn to share and get along with others in the classroom. Teachers must teach students turn-taking, asking for permission, and putting away their things.

By the time you see them acting like "little angels" and learning at their level in first grade, you can be sure that many persons took great interest in preparing them to get there!

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